

## [Review] Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) Towards psychologies of liberation

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Book review: Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) *Towards psychologies of liberation*,  
Palgrave Macmillan.\*

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In its original formulations the liberatory psychology project sought to humanize, give *voice* and rehabilitate the *subject* in contexts where oppressive regimes and institutions, extreme poverty and exclusion rendered people invisible, disposable. The project's aims are ones of empowerment and freedom from oppression. Discourse, subjectivity and power are at the heart of liberatory psychology, both in terms of understanding the ways in which the complex of oppression and exclusion operate but also in terms of their use in resisting, disrupting and at times re-framing such dynamics. It is both these operations, as well as their inter-action, that will be of interest to those concerned with the politics of subjectivity, and the point from which Watkins and Shulman's book offers a promising point of departure.

The aim of Watkins and Shulman's carefully crafted, and in places truly inspiring, piece of work is to "re-think the goals and practices of psychology in an age of disruptive globalization" (p.1). The authors draw on an environmental metaphor likening liberatory psychology to what they call "practices of assisted regeneration" (p. 15). In choosing such a metaphor by which to frame their work, the authors remind us of the grounding of liberatory psychology practices in unique chronotopes that take their characteristics from geopolitical and historical location, culture, and material and social relations.

Translating directly from ecological thinking, where assisted regeneration refers to "a process by which humans collaborate to serve biodiversity within devastated environments" (p.15), the authors see assisted regeneration at a cultural and psychosocial level as referring to protective and constructive practices in "cases where individuals and communities have found local, creative, and participatory solutions to problematic conditions and institutions by transforming their psychological relationship to self and other, sometimes in dialogue with

psychologists who are transgressing academic boundaries” (p.16). In this sense their work is interdisciplinary and intends to disrupt both academic and professional identities.

To concretise their thinking, the authors introduce us to two exemplary projects that capture their intended meaning of assisted regeneration. The first project is the Association of Maya Ixil Women in Guatemala (ADMI), a community action research project with a truth and reconciliation focus that has been documented by M.Brinton Lykes, and colleagues, a social psychologist and one of the project collaborators. The second project is the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, a women-led community mobilization network with an environmental focus. Both projects serve as reminders throughout the book of the ethos, values and practices to which liberatory psychology refers.

The book is organised into four parts and a metaphor of journeying is used to take the reader through each section. The first part of the book sets the “compass points” and the ground that the authors propose to cover. Part two elaborates on the different dimensions of “disruptive globalization” and the legacy of colonialism. Here we find a very interesting history of the links between psychoanalysis and social justice, as well as a cross-cultural discussion of psychological disorders that makes their socially constructed nature vividly visible. The authors’ analysis is supported with an eclectic mix of examples from historical, anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic writing, as well as from literature and popular culture, and represents a strong example of pluralistic and interdisciplinary writing.

The third and fourth sections of the book are the strongest and most thought provoking. The authors remind us that “one of the key tasks of liberatory psychology is to analyze how people defend or break with old dominant ideas and find (or fail to find) a language for new ones” (p.133). It is this space that lies “betwixt and between” old and new that is the most

exciting, creative, as well as sometimes destructive, in both the theory and practice of liberatory psychology and here the authors do not disappoint with their contribution.

Psychologists who work in the community and liberatory tradition aim to identify and/or create safe spaces in which narratives of “terror” can be reworked into “tales of joy” (Rappaport, 2000) enabling communities to take charge of their own destinies. Such processes are characteristically non-linear and their outcomes are often unpredictable. As such, the uncertainty and emergent orientation of liberatory psychology praxis is best captured by concepts of change and subjectivity that are “fluid rather than solid and process-oriented rather than topographical” (Flax, 1993:37). Here the authors draw on the philosophical language of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Braidotti (1994). While sometimes “downright maddening” (Holland, 1999:1), such language with its sheer force of imagination, provides an excellent way of expressing and exploring principles of connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:25) that are brought about by liberatory psychology praxis. Such language supports the re-imagining of different subjectivities and creates “an improvisational space for more consciously performing identity rather than unconsciously enacting a set of unreflective identifications” (p.171). The authors further illustrate the transformational spaces and processes of a liberatory psychology by drawing on literature from psychotherapeutic work, symbolic interactionism, feminist psychology and critical pedagogy. The fourth and final part of the book continues to develop concepts and practices in the spaces in-between old and new through an exploration of communities of resistance, liberatory arts, critical participatory action research and dialogical ethics.

The authors make a number of innovations in the conceptualisation of this space. Their conceptual emphasis on practice, performance, and interdependence creates subtle shifts to the

liberatory psychology discourse that is often dominated by polemical and normative writing that oversimplifies the complexities of practice. The language of dialogue and practice, rather than the more customary language of empowerment and methodology, is a particularly welcome reframing of liberatory psychology discourses. It represents a much-needed departure from thinking about transformation in *entative* terms and moves the reader towards an appreciation of liberatory psychology as supporting *processes* of becoming (Hosking and Morley, 1991). Their use of the metaphor of journeying appropriately reflects the open-ended, emergent and exploratory nature of liberatory psychology practice and the eclectic mix of examples captures the multi-dimensional characteristics of transformational phenomena. The introduction of the term of *cultural worker* and the focus on culture are particularly useful for thinking about the practices of those who engage with and support community work of this nature.

As a work of re-storying, I think the authors have been successful. Their reframing of the problem through the use of environmental ideas works well, particularly as the projects they have chosen capture the ethos of this reframing. In particular, such reframing alludes to and has the potential of fruitfully connecting to thinking in political and administrative sciences that often deal with similar problems, such as Harding's *tragedy of the commons* (Harding, 1968; 1998) or Flyverberg's (2004) *phronetic social science*. Both these approaches argue strongly that the 'solutions' to societal 'problems' are neither scientific nor technical but instead require a different kind of knowledge, phronetic knowledge (Flyverberg, 2004) or knowledge of the third kind (Shotter, 1990); precisely the knowledge that emerges in liberatory psychology contexts that are created through multi-knowledge "relational" practices (Bouwen, 1998).

The processual framing of the book, the references and discussions of post-modern authors such as Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti, and others, are perhaps unsurprising given the

authors' own intellectual biographies, in particular Helene Shulman's previous work that draws on complex systems thinking. What was disappointing, at least for this reader, was that given such biographies the authors did not apply this thinking to an in-depth exploration and interpretation of a single case study (or comparative case studies) of liberatory psychology in practice as I initially thought that they might with the ADMI and Green Belt Movement examples. Furthermore, while the authors argue that liberatory psychology has the potential to succeed as well as to fail in its aims, there is little in the way of the exploration of failure in this book. In trying to create safe and protected spaces we don't always succeed. Yet our failures are rarely reported, making liberatory psychology discourses highly problematic and the potential for learning limited. We rarely enquire into experiences of setting up, sustaining or participating in dialogue, relying instead on dominant collective narratives of (successful) change. It is this element of self-reflection and scrutiny that is missing from the liberatory psychology narrative, or "assisted regeneration" as it is found here.

This neglect for exploring and critically reflecting on both possibilities and limitations of liberatory psychology is in part the consequence of a discourse that focuses on juxtaposing and replacing one *telos* (progress) with another (utopia, liberation). The replacement of one telos for another sits uneasily with a discourse that asks us to remain in-between. In practice, the in-between is often characterised by ongoing ambivalence, contradictions and tensions. We impose closure and order through our narratives of change. Yet if we are to take the authors' position of "ongoing revolution" seriously, such narratives need to remain open. Maintaining the tension of the in-between in practice, as well as in its theoretical representation, is not easy. It can, however, be facilitated through more longitudinal, in-depth, engaged and multi-perspective

research on the efforts and endeavours of liberatory psychology – including an extensive articulation of the politics of subjectivity that liberatory psychology relies on and in turn creates.

Liberatory psychology is, as Foster (2004:560) has rightly observed, a paradoxical project: at once “simple, straightforward and tidy” while at the same time “fiendishly complex, difficult, elusive and messy” (Foster, 2004:560). In this paradox it is stories that will open the space for practice (de Certeau, 1984) and make “theorizing more aware of its moment, more responsible to its erotics, and at the same time, if paradoxically, both more literary and more real” (Gallop, 2002:11). In other words, there is a need for more empirical work and stories from the field, both our own and others. The ADMI project that the authors use as an illustrative study in Chapter 1 is a case in point. This is a rare example of an extensively and sensitively documented project that allows readers to appreciate, engage with and debate the issues that such projects face. Apart from it being an exemplar of such work it is also an extensive empirical documentation of an *actual* piece of liberatory psychology work rather than just a treatise *about* liberatory psychology (Herr and Anderson, 2005:6). It is my hope that Watkins and Shulman’s book opens up the space for multi-perspective stories, anecdotes and reflective practice of liberatory psychology, of its successes as well as its challenges.



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